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SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA - ELECTORAL REFORM PART I OF III:  
WHAT'S AT STAKE?

REF: A. KUWAIT 656  
[B](#). KUWAIT 636 AND PREVIOUS  
[C](#). 05 KUWAIT 5186

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary and comment: This is the first in a series of three cables on electoral reform in Kuwait. Debate over proposals to reduce the number of electoral constituencies, a key political reform, continues to dominate political discussion in Kuwait. Reducing the number of constituencies from the current 25 would significantly decrease the potential for electoral and political corruption; reduce the influence of individuals, business interests, and the Government on Parliament; and force parliamentary candidates to campaign on more broad-based political issues rather than limited familial, tribal, and/or sectarian connections. While both political and popular support for the reform is growing, there is still considerable disagreement on the number and geographic distribution of the reduced number of constituencies; any redistricting would seriously impact electoral outcomes. Proposals vary widely and many are merely intended to serve specific political interests. Parliament is scheduled to discuss the issue on April 17. Ironically, the corruption that electoral reform aims to limit is also the primary obstacle to its passage. Due to entrenched interests, particularly in the Government, many may be ultimately unwilling to back a reform that will limit their influence in Parliament. The outcome of the April 17 session will indicate how serious the Government is about implementing this and other important reforms. End summary and comment.

#### A Long Stalled Reform

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Proposals to reduce the number of electoral constituencies have been long stalled in Parliament with both the Government and parliamentarians (MPs) blaming each other for the delay. In a positive development, the Government recently supported a parliamentary motion to set April 17 as the date to discuss a report that Parliament's Defense and Interior Affairs Committee was tasked to submit on the issue (ref B); however, the committee, which is composed entirely of MPs opposing the reform, has twice failed to meet previous deadlines. The committee's report is supposed to be based on a new Government reduction proposal, which is still being drafted by a ministerial committee chaired by Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior Shaykh Jaber Mubarak Al-Sabah. In 2004, the Government submitted two separate proposals to Parliament, both proposing a reduction to ten

constituencies. The proposals were effectively tabled, however, when MPs failed to agree on which proposal to discuss first. Any further delay beyond the April 17 date is likely to make passage of the reform before the 2007 parliamentary elections highly unlikely.

#### Why Electoral Reform Matters

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¶3. (SBU) A reduction in the number of electoral constituencies from the current 25 would significantly decrease the potential for electoral and political corruption. Under the current system, each constituency averages 5,500 registered voters with each voter being able to vote for two candidates; the electoral system is single round, first-two-past the post. In the 2003 elections, the top two candidates averaged 1927 and 1628 votes, respectively; two MPs were elected by a margin of only three votes (ref C). With so few voters per constituency, the potential for corruption is very high and candidates often win or lose elections based on only several hundred votes.

¶4. (SBU) An additional drawback to the 25 constituency system is that it encourages MPs to run on familial, tribal, and/or sectarian connections. In many cases, the candidates who are elected are those that can obtain the most favors for their constituents, leading to the rise of a group of MPs commonly called "service deputies." Fewer constituencies with more voters per constituency would theoretically force candidates to campaign on more broad based political platforms, increasing the influence of political associations, particularly the Islamists. (Note: Political parties are not officially recognized by the Government. End note.)

#### Same Problem, Different Solutions

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¶5. (SBU) While support for the reform seems to be growing,

there is still considerable disagreement on the number and geographic distribution of the reduced number of constituencies. According to a recent survey conducted by the Arabic-daily Al-Qabas, the majority of those surveyed, 55%, supported a reduction to five constituencies. Thirty percent supported ten constituencies and 15% supported maintaining the current 25. Proposals vary widely, ranging from ten constituencies to one, with each dividing constituencies differently, leading many to accuse MPs of attempting to gerrymander the new districts in their favor. Another unresolved issue is the number of candidates each voter could vote for in the larger constituencies. Some plans propose reducing the number of constituencies, but continuing to allow voters to vote for just two candidates, a proposal that would offer little improvement over the current electoral system.

¶6. (SBU) During a March 15 meeting with Poloff, Vice President of Research at Kuwait University Dr. Jassem Mohammed Karam, who wrote his PhD thesis on Kuwait's electoral system, reviewed a recent report he wrote for the Council of Ministers, in which he analyzed the reduction plans proposed by MPs and concluded by advising the Government to support five constituencies. In his view, the MPs' proposals were "biased": constituencies were divided to benefit their own political interests. He was similarly critical of the two previous Government proposals, which he claimed were "invalid."

¶7. (SBU) In his report, Karam advised the Government to support five constituencies divided on the following five criteria: (1) preventing gerrymandering; (2) maintaining, "as much as possible," demographic consistency; (3) minimizing sectarian and tribal distribution; (4) reducing the divide between urban and rural constituencies; and (5) ensuring all segments of Kuwaiti society obtain representation in Parliament. Karam also proposed voters be given four votes

each, which he believed would limit tribal and/or sectarian majorities in certain constituencies from monopolizing elections and lead to more equal representation in Parliament. While stressing that electoral reform was not a panacea for Kuwait's political problems, Karam noted that it would significantly reduce the electoral "anomalies and loopholes" that contribute to political corruption.

18. (U) Part II of this series will examine who supports and who opposes the reduction.

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